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Since the 1960s the reception of biblical texts in religious education has been a subject of empirical research. In the study religious pedagogues seek, firstly, to determine the subjectivity of the recipients (i.e. students) and, secondly, make recommendations for more effective teaching (i.e. to teachers). The research concentrated mainly on students’ ability to learn to understand and interpret biblical texts. From a cognitive perspective it is assumed that their potential relates to the phases of religious development (Fowler, Oser & Gmünder). On this basis it is often concluded (e.g. by Bucher) that many texts are too difficult for primary school children. Their cognitive structure does not permit comprehension of many biblical texts according to their intention (from an exegetical point of view). Hence the recommendations to teachers are that such texts cannot really be grasped hermeneutically before the age of twelve.

Fricke’s Habilitationsschrift represents a new departure in empirical research into the reception of biblical texts. It is not totally new in that, like other scholars (Wegenast, Bucher, Schweitzer), he bases his research on the concept of reception aesthetics (Eco). What is new is the radical way in which he applies it. Fricke takes students as readers of biblical texts so seriously that he does not test their understanding and interpretation against the normative views of adult exegetes, but assesses their hermeneutic comprehension in the context of their own age and learning community, namely the primary school class. Another innovative feature is that Fricke focuses on difficult Old Testament texts. By difficult we mean that these texts present offensive, irritating or startling material, which complicates reader identification with characters in the text. His choice of these texts is based on the assumption that they are most likely to lay bare the fundamental issues of biblical didactics. Fricke moreover studies primary school children’s reception and to this end he makes use of primary school pedagogic concepts. That, too, is innovative. In practice it means that his intervention applies didactic principles from language instruction (i.e. German) as regards reading with understanding and philosophising with children.

The study is exploratory and qualitative. Fricke first used a questionnaire to determine which biblical texts teachers (N=43) find difficult and what possibilities they perceive to deal with them. Secondly, he analysed various group discussions and drawings done by pupils (N=48) in response to a number of difficult biblical texts. On the basis of this study he found that children come up with surprising insights and interpretations. Although their insights and interpretations do not always tally with exegetical findings, they are tenable in the perspective of collective understanding in the classroom. Children’s efforts in this regard, Fricke maintains, relate not only to their cognitive potential but also to their religious socialisation, personal interests and experience. He argues, furthermore, that difficult biblical texts in fact challenge children to develop by creating a certain tension and suspending familiar assumptions.

Although reception of biblical texts has been a research subject for some time, relatively little knowledge is available. Nonetheless teachers could benefit by knowing how children learn to understand and interpret these texts. Fricke’s searching study meets the need for such knowledge. It is an interesting and important piece of research and the findings have practical relevance. There are only two criticisms, one theoretical, the other at the analytical level. Firstly, why does the study not make use of recent
theories of learning and learning processes? From a socio-cultural perspective, learning is seen as assimilation of as yet unfamiliar material within a particular social context. Such a perspective would broaden and deepen both Fricke's hypotheses and his findings. Fricke's database, in addition, is extensive. Why are the various data sources (teachers' responses, children's discussions and their drawings) not correlated in the analyses? Differentiated and integrated analyses could well broaden and deepen the existing findings. In short, an important and interesting study, which could be made even more rewarding than that which the author is presenting explicitly at this stage. — Theo van der Zee, Nijmegen (NL)